

# Narcissists bring pluses, minuses to the workplace

July 16 2010, By Mary Katt

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(PhysOrg.com) -- You know the type: self-aggrandizing, self-indulgent and self-absorbed.

New research led by psychologist Jack Goncalo, assistant professor in the ILR School, shows how and why narcissists can influence creativity in groups and in the workplace. The findings will be published in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#).

For starters, narcissists are not necessarily more creative than less narcissistic peers, but they *think*

they are, and they are adept at convincing others to share their inflated view of themselves. Three studies led by Goncalo in 2007 and 2008 showed that narcissistic individuals asked to pitch creative ideas to a target person were judged by the targets as being more creative than others.

Why?

Narcissists convey more enthusiasm, confidence and charisma while they are selling their ideas to others.

"The danger is that the ideas suggested by narcissists might actually be implemented despite the fact that they are not necessarily very good," said Goncalo, of ILR's Department of [Organizational Behavior](#). "A constant pattern of selecting style over substance may benefit the

narcissist, but can drag down the team."

The research also shows that narcissists can contribute to a team's creative outcomes -- but not on their own. Goncalo explained, "There is a curvilinear effect -- having more narcissists is better for generating creative solutions, but having too many narcissists provides diminishing returns."

In the workplace, for example, "You want creative tension. Narcissists shake things up -- they stimulate competition and provoke controversy." But a work setting "that is conducive to creativity is not necessarily related to harmony" and might even lead to improved problem solving, he said. On a team with too many narcissists, however, "It starts to get chaotic."

The research team, which included Cornell Ph.D. student Sharon H. Kim and Stanford University Professor Francis J. Flynn, also found:

- Ideas are viewed as highly creative when pitched with confidence and enthusiasm -- a style narcissists come by instinctively, but that others might learn to imitate.
- Although most organizations try to select ideas that are objectively creative, the selection process might be contaminated by the style through which ideas are communicated. As a result, creative output might gradually decline as true creative talent is continuously traded for charisma and enthusiasm without substance.
- To capitalize on narcissistic talent, colleagues should collaborate with narcissists and encourage them to collaborate with each other. Groups may turn a negative trait into a valuable source of

creative tension. It sometimes works best to assign narcissists to pitching ideas, not creating them.

In the meantime, how does one survive obnoxious, know-it-all narcissists? Watch the way they work and learn from their style, Goncalo advises.

"Having a creative idea is not enough, unless you know how to sell it to others. Be confident. Be enthusiastic. Never be self-deprecating," he said. "While the rest of us are being modest and polite, the narcissists may be getting ahead."

Provided by Cornell University

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